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Mapping “diversity of participation” in networked media environments

By

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Abstract

In the United States the transition to an increasingly digital communication environment under pro-market policies has challenged traditional formulations of media diversity and localism regulation centered on content origination requirements and media ownership. Building on an overview of the participatory development and media policy literatures, this paper argues for a participatory community development approach to the redefinition of these public interest policies in networked scenarios. Asking *who* is participating in *what*, and *for whose benefit*, I propose a diversity matrix of various modalities of community participation in key public service functions of digital information organizations. The paper discusses the advantages of this approach in response to policy concerns about cultural diversity, digital inclusion and democratic governance of local information ecosystems.

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I. Introduction

Along with competition, diversity and localism principles have long provided the foundation of the public interest standard in U.S. media policy. Advocates of deregulation suggest that market diffusion of digital media technologies have eliminated the need for these policies as the convergence of production platforms, distribution channels, and consumption practices have fostered a participatory, “do-it-yourself” (DIY) media culture that generates unlimited content diversity in our media system. However, these accounts tell us little about what *participation* means in this new environment, *who* is participating in *what*, and *for whose benefit* (Cornwall, 2008). In recent years, reports by the Knight Commission (2009) and the Federal Communications Commission (Waldman, 2011) have warned about the risk of growing participation gaps in communities exposed to compound gaps in local information, broadband access, and literacy. In this context, some media policy scholars argue that critical to redefining media diversity and localism policies is the set of conditions under which participation of diverse local publics in the media is produced (Aslama & Napoli, 2010; Fuentes-Bautista, forthcoming; Napoli, 2011). I contend that these policies should be reexamined, paying more attention to users’ competencies, and local institutional resources (and lack thereof) that shape citizens’ engagement in the media. This paper proposes rethinking media diversity and localism as plurality of media governance structures (*institutional participation*) and media participatory practices (*individual participation*) that support various public service functions in local information markets. They include access to communications infrastructure, connection of diverse local publics, and creation and curation of non-commercial content.

Accounting for the complexity of these dynamics demands new models that more directly connect different *modalities* of community engagement in local information and media institutions to community building and social inclusion goals. Integrating community development and planning (Arstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008; Pretty, 1995; White 1996; Williams, 2004), participatory communication (Carpentier, 2011; Jacobson & Servaes, 1999; Servaes, 1999; Tufte & Mefalopoulos 2009), and public service media literatures (Braman, 2007a, 2007b; Goodman and Chen, 2010; Napoli, 2007, 2011), I discuss various definitions of media participation for community building, and propose a matrix to evaluate modalities of media participation across different public service functions of local information institutions. I illustrate these concepts through examples from the public media and community technology literatures.

Media diversity and localism policies address fundamental questions about media governance, and its connection to democracy (Karppinen, 2010; Napoli 2001, 2007). While in recent years liberal interpretations of media democracy as individual freedom of expression and plurality of ideas in the marketplace have deepened, my analysis favors participatory interpretations of media governance that emphasize the expansion of citizens’ communicative capacities (Garnham, 1999), as a means to achieve “parity of participation” (Fraser, 2010) in local information environments. My analysis also assumes that politics of place still matters for media governance, and for definitions of the public interest in media and telecommunication policy. In networked environments, social mediation occurs online and offline via densely connected networks of institutions and individuals (Castells, 2007). Although communication power is constituted in all these dimensions, it is still grounded in socio-economic and cultural dynamics of place,

and thus inflected with issues of class, gender, and ethnic relations of geographic communities. Furthermore, in the context of growing disparities in a global network society, a participatory governance perspective on media diversity and localism is urgently needed to address the democratic deficit of informationalism.

II. Media diversity and localism in transition

Over the last decade, pro-market media policies have significantly muddled discussions about the redefinition of diversity and localism policies for the digital era. As Goodman and Chen (2010) point out, such arguments have undermined not only traditional marketplace sponsorship for American journalism but also the political viability of policies that fund community and local public service media institutions.

Likewise, the marketization of broadband policy has severely undermined federal and state support for community-based and local telecommunication and media initiatives. By July 2012, nineteen state legislatures had enacted regulation that discourages or bans municipalities and communities from building their own broadband networks. Many of these states—which include Alabama, Arkansas and Texas—host small, local markets underserved by commercial providers. However, state legislators have accepted the industry argument that municipal networks erode “consumer choice” by making markets less attractive to “competition.”¹ Similarly, seeking to promote competition, more than 20 states have exempted new digital video providers—such as Verizon and AT&T—from municipal controls previously applied to local cable video companies (Taylor, 2009). Under increasing industry lobbyism, state legislators have structured state video franchises so they relax or do away with the mandate to fund local public, educational, and government (PEG) access channels—institutions created more than three decades ago to make the cable system serve information needs of communities.² Although in 2009 the Community Access Preservation Act (CAP Act) was introduced in Congress to reinstitute and extend PEG protections, deliberations on the proposal have come to a halt. As a result, between 2005 and 2010, 100 local PEG access centers around the country were closed, and others face significant budget cuts.³

¹ A list of states with anti-munibroadband regulation is available at: <http://www.muninetworks.org/communitymap>.

² Community access channels emerged in the 1970s as the result of citizen and municipal activism that sought to strengthen local control on the cable system by negotiating local franchise agreements with cable providers. In exchange for the rights to lay cable wires on public land, communities required cable companies to allot to public, educational, and government (PEG) programming on the cable network a portion of their revenues (typically between 3% and 5%), capital equipment support, and carriage capacity. In 1972 the FCC applied common-carriage rules to cable providers, instituting PEG channels. Although such rules were toned down by the Cable Act of 1984, and later by the 1996 Telecom Act, the law has preserved PEG requirements as part of local franchising practices.

³ See report of the Buske Group (April 8, 2011). *Analysis of recent PEG access center closures, funding cutbacks and related threats*. Alliance of Communications Democracy.

Doubts about what media diversity and localism mean in networked environments come in part from the difficulty that U.S. regulators have had defining standards that apply across media and telecommunication industries (Braman, 2004). Regulations on media diversity developed under the “broadcasting model” of media policy, which distinguishes between diversity of sources (media outlets), of media content (representation and viewpoints), and of audience exposure (attention) (Napoli, 2007). Likewise, regulation on localism mainly addresses questions about the geographic origin of particular media content (e.g., news, public affairs, religious or cultural content) (Napoli, 2001). As Braman (2007b) aptly argues, since the emphasis is usually on the production and distribution of media content, more complex and potentially controversial issues—such as local media ownership and control, participation of local talent, and inclusion of diverse local voices—tend to be ignored.

One of the limitations of these debates is that they fail to recognize that media diversity and localism—or the democratization of local community through media—are complex processes that cannot be captured by looking at the number of media outlets or content alone (Braman, 2007a, 2007b; McDowell & Lee, 2007). Although of critical importance, the number of media outlets and the percentage of locally produced media content tell us little about the ability of diverse, local publics to access this content, how they participate in these productions, how their voices are heard, and more importantly, how this process impacts citizens’ well being and community life. Therefore, policy interventions and methodologies to assess achievement of these goals should include multiple dimensions.

Member states of the European Union have recognized this complexity in the design of the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) index introduced in 2009. The MPM is a “risk-based” analytical framework that employs 166 quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess “risk domains” associated with media pluralism, including traditional dimensions such as media ownership/control; types of genre, cultural, political and geographic diversity; and new areas like expression, independent media supervision, and media literacy and use (Valke, 2011). As Napoli (2011) explains, this approach is innovative in incorporating indicators of “audience-empowering capabilities” such as media literacy and the extent citizen groups engage in online political activities.

In its groundbreaking assessment on the democratic potential of digital media in the U.S., the Knight Commission on Information Needs of Community in a Democracy (2009) adopted a similar perspective, proposing to replace the dominant industry-based, media-centric vision of public interest regulation with a user-centered, information ecology approach that takes into account how citizens participate in their local information ecosystem. This digital information ecology, Knight Commission argues, is supported not only by local media organizations but also by other local institutions such as public libraries, schools, and local government institutions that facilitate the flow of information in a community.

Napoli (2011) writes that the work of the Knight Commission has opened up new spaces in which to interrogate media diversity in the U.S. by focusing on local institutions and audience’s participation in media consumption and production. However, this new focus on audience participation, he cautions, is “de-institutionalizing” media diversity debates. I argue that the de-institutionalization of these debates can depoliticize media and telecommunication policy by ignoring issues of governance in local media markets.

For instance, in its comprehensive inquiry about “The Future of Media,” the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) evaluated diversity issues by looking at both structural conditions (minority media ownership) and conditions of media consumption (how minorities access and use different media platforms to find news and information) (Waldman, 2012: 254:257). However, the inquiry was inconclusive about the severity of threats to media diversity, describing the situation for ethnic minorities in particular as a “best-of-times-worst-of-times story” in which minority media ownership is in decline, but access and usage of electronic platforms by minority audiences keeps increasing (21). This analysis misses the mark by equating minority participation in media governance structures (i.e. minority ownership of local media organizations) with improved digital media access and utilization (i.e., use of different digital devices, improved users’ skills).

Seeking clarity on these issues, the FCC recently asked the Communication Policy Research Network (CPRN) –a national, non-partisan, multi-disciplinary network of academics and experts– to elucidate what constitutes “critical information needs” of communities, identifying key barriers to addressing those needs. The CPRN Report advances the discussion in three important directions (Friedland et al. 2012). First, it identifies eight critical areas for the analysis of production, distribution and consumption of community information; they include: 1) emergencies and risks, 2) health and welfare; 3) education; 4) transportation; 5) economic opportunities, including job information and training; 6) quality of the environment and recreation; 7) civic information; and 8) political information on local and national governance. Second, it distinguishes between two broad dimensions of critical information needs: (1) those fundamental to individuals in everyday life, and (2) those that affect larger groups and communities. And third, it warns us that:

“Given a rapidly changing demographic landscape in the United States, it is essential to refine and extend our conceptions of diversity of ownership and participation in the production, distribution, and means of access to critical information. *We need new definitions of participation that more accurately reflect the multidimensional pathways by which the American public engages with media and critical information* [emphasis added]” (Friedland et al. 2012, iv.).

Communication scholars have begun conceptualizing how policy-relevant concepts of “diversity of participation” and “participatory localism” might look (see Aslama & Napoli, 2010; Fuentes-Bautista, forthcoming). This paper builds on their work and argues that a participatory development perspective can better connect media diversity and localism concerns to specific equity issues in local communities. Seeking more clarity and specificity on what public participation means and what it may entail, the following section discusses different conceptualizations of participatory practices and governance in community development.

This literature review begins with 108 journal articles published in the last twenty years in the fields of participatory community development, urban planning, and development communication. Articles were screened for evidence in three related areas: models of participatory governance, typologies of participatory practices, and modalities of community engagement in development programs. The list was then paired down to 53 titles, including eleven meta-analyses of the fields. This list was supplemented with titles

and edited collections identified as foundational. The following section summarizes findings of this evaluation.

III. Interrogating participatory community development

Scholars of community development and planning, and development communication have long been concerned with participatory practices, understanding that they connect normative democratic ideals to the institutional and material dimensions of the social world. As Servaes argues, raising the question of participation “directly addresses power and its distribution in society” (1999: 198). From a governance perspective, public participation provides a basis for the exercise of power on behalf of the citizenry. But participation is never a linear process that always leads to social inclusion and democratization. Participatory governance can open spaces for citizen engagement and inclusion; however, it can reproduce inequalities because those with higher income, social capital and education are more likely to actively represent their interests. As Fraser (2010) warns us, those advocating for participatory governance must provide answers to the old democratic dilemma of how to achieve “parity of participation” in the material, symbolic and governance dimensions of the social. From a participatory development perspective, different forms of community engagement can be also regarded as struggles through which local actors reproduce or change a given social order (Cornwall, 2006). In order to deal with these tensions, Cornwall (2008) proposes to interrogate the structural conditions under which participatory practices are produced, paying closer attention to who participates, in what, and for whose benefit.

The study of participation in many social fields, including communication, can be traced back to intellectual and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that denounced Western nations for modernization projects that fostered dependency among developing regions. Over the same period, in Western nations including the U.S., participation became the mantra of civil rights movements and social activists that battled institutional, social and cultural segregation. Over the last forty years, the literature on participation has moved through distinct phases: from the structural, anti-modernization critique of development (Arstein, 1969; Freire, 1970); designing methods that “put the last first,” and transform passive recipients into active participants in these projects (Chambers, 1983); interrogating stakeholders’ interests in the participatory process (Pretty 1995; Rocha, 1997; White 1996); to participatory practice as a norm of the sustainable development agenda (Servaes, 2008); and the ensuing critique to the institutionalization of participatory interventions (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Williams 2004). Reed (2008) argues that the current literature on participatory development has achieved a “post-participation consensus” recognizing the benefits of these practices, while facing the challenges of building just and sustainable participatory structures. My assessment of the literature does not seek to identify best practices or produce a tool-kit for practitioners and decision-makers. Rather, this review identifies critical dimensions of media participatory practices, discussing their import for democratic media governance.

a. ‘Who’ participates?

A primary concern of participatory development is, *who* participates in these projects. Recognizing that “the people” is not a homogenous entity, advocates of

participation emphasized that larger structural forces have excluded and oppressed certain social groups (Freire, 1970). One of the most popular critiques to the top-down model of development was articulated by the farmer participatory research approach (FPR), a methodology that seeks to transform ‘recipients’ of agricultural development into active participants (Chambers, 1983). The FPR approach stresses consultation with residents of rural communities, particularly in the formative evaluation and implementation of agricultural development projects. Employing diverse “participatory techniques” FPR seeks to incorporate “local knowledge” in development interventions.

Similar methods are employed in conservation and resource management (CRM) as an alternative to the top-down, science-led transfer-of-technology paradigm. Proponents suggest that a combination of local and scientific knowledge lead to more robust solutions to scientific and policy problems (Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Reed, 2008). Participatory methods are regarded as consensus builders that bring together diverse stakeholders (i.e., experts, decision-makers, landowners and different members of the public). From a citizen-science perspective, current CRM scholarship uses digital 3-D visualization and “inputs” from different stakeholders with potentially competing goals (e.g., recreationist, economic, ecological) to inform the decision-modeling process. The result is expected to yield a more balanced management of natural resources. However, as Sheppard (2005) aptly argues, even the most sophisticated models fail if the intervention overlooks trust and transparency in efforts to involve laymen’s views in the realm of expert knowledge.

However, critical development scholars argue that participatory interventions that solely focus on “methods” for engaging “minority views” fail to address power imbalances that have historically excluded ethnic minorities, rural populations, the poor, the disenfranchised, and populations at risk (e.g., youth, women, and elderly) (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Wilkins, 2000). This critique implies that minority groups are “included” through nominal or instrumental participation, leaving unchanged the structural conditions that create social disparities in the first place. Drawing on Paulo Freire’s ideas, scholars and practitioners have responded to what they see as the instrumentalization of participatory practices by calling anew for dialogue and critical pedagogy as communication strategies to support empowerment (Servaes, Jacobson & White, 1996; Jacobson & Servaes, 1999). This views participation as a process, and emphasizes practices based on group dialogue and deliberation, listening, co-decision, and cultural synthesis, as well as mutual understanding and reflexive practice. The long-term goal is not to “target minority groups” but to promote social integration of all community members in different phases of the development project while enhancing autonomy, recognition and representation of previously marginalized groups.

b. Participation in ‘what’?

A second perspective on participatory practices maps out different modalities of engagement by asking who is in control of particular phases and spaces of the participatory process. This perspective assumes participation as either a fundamental ‘right,’ or as the materialization of other citizens’ rights that organize community life. Table 1 summarizes the criteria used by different typologies of participatory practices.

Table 1. Classification Criteria of Different Modalities of Participatory Practices

Criteria	Examples
Degrees of citizen control or empowerment	Arnstein (1969); Rocha (1997); Lawrence, (2006)
Degrees of control over information and communication flows	Rowe & Frewer (2005); Carpentier (2011)
Degrees of influence in specific organizational aspects of community development projects	Pretty (1995); Laverack (2001); Mefalopulos, (2008); Tufte & Mefalopulos, (2009)
Stakeholders' interests and control over distribution of benefits in the process of participation	White (1996); Williams (2004); Cornwall (2008)

Key to this perspective are people's abilities and autonomy to engage in the participatory process. Arnstein's (1969) influential "ladder of participation" posits "citizen control" over resources as the most advanced form of citizen engagement, identifying "manipulation," "placation," "information," and even "consultation" as inferior, "tokenistic" forms of participatory practice. In a different rendition of this scale, Rocha (1997) focuses on individual, group, and community empowerment's impacts on stakeholders' socio-political power to shape urban planning projects. Arnstein's ideas have inspired numerous analyses of participatory practices (Lawrence, 2006), and some of them highlight how communication and information flows shape this process (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). In interrogating different *spaces* of participation, community development scholars have also focused on the public's ability to influence certain phases or organizational aspects of these projects. Authors distinguish between citizen participation in the leadership, management, needs assessment, and resource mobilization of the project. They argue that citizen participation in the "implementation" and "evaluation" of community development projects is common while public involvement in "decision-making" and in "benefit-sharing" is less frequent (Cohen & Upholff, 1980; Laverack, 2001; Pretty, 1995; Reed 2008). Engagement in the planning phase, in particular (i.e., generation of ideas, formulation of options, choices, and operational decision) is critical in shaping outcomes and power-sharing dynamics in the overall project.

Pretty (1995) propose a scale that combines 'modalities' and 'spaces' of participation in analyzing control over phases of natural resources management projects. In a seven-step scale that goes from passive participation to self-mobilization, he identifies intermediate stages that underline the various instances through which people are given the opportunity to *influence* development projects: providing feedback on pre-defined plans (*participation by consultation*); contributing resources in exchange for benefits (*participation by incentives*); performing certain pre-determined tasks to implement the intervention and in order to reduce costs (*functional participation*); or being recognized as important stakeholders and invited to join the analysis and development of action plans for the project (*interactive participation*) (1252).

Communication scholars have connected some of these ideas to UNESCO's discussions on the definition of "participatory communication." UNESCO draws clear distinctions along three dimensions: 1) *access* (referring to the use of media for consumption of public information, and diverse and relevant programs); 2) *participation* (public involvement in the production, management and planning of communication

systems); and *self-determination* (forms of self-management in which members of the public own or control the operations of communication or media organizations) (Servaes, 1999). Implicit is that the category of media access is not “fully” participatory as it refers to opportunities for individuals and social groups to choose within a pre-established set of media services typically offered by commercial providers. This is what Carpentier (2011) terms a “minimalist” approach to media participation. A “maximalist” approach would always involve practices of consultation, collaboration and co-decision in the production and distribution of media content and services. Building on these discussions, Carpentier proposes to analyze people’s engagement with the media by “access, interactivity and participation.” This AIP-model highlights how communication flows shape citizen involvement with the media (Table 2).

Table 2.- Arstein’s Ladder of Participation and Communication Practices

Participation in community development projects		Communication practices	
Citizen control	Degrees of Citizen Control	Participation: Two way communication; degrees of co-decision, power to decide is shared	Maximalist approach to participation
Delegated power			
Partnership			
Placation	Degrees of Tokenism	Interactivity: Two-way communication; power to decide remains with the sender	
Consultation			
Informing			
Therapy	Non-participation	Access: One-way communication, different intents; power to decide remains with the sender	Minimalist approach to participation
Manipulation			

Adapted from Arstein (1969:217) and Carpentier (2011:130)

Locating different ‘spaces of media participation,’ Carpentier (2011) makes a useful distinction between participation “in” and “through” the media. The first “deals with participation of non-professionals in the production of media outputs (*content-related participation*) and in media decision-making (*structural participation*)” (88); the second refers to “the opportunities for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in the public sphere” (89) (*participation in the public sphere*).

Communication scholars and practitioners have recently applied Pretty’s ideas to the analysis of communication for development interventions (Mefalopulos, 2008; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). They draw distinctions between practices such as viewing and listening as passive forms of participation; information sharing, interactivity and consultation, as functional forms of participation; and co-production and partnerships as empowered or transformational participatory practices. They stress that issues of social

recognition and representation in decision-making are critical to increasing community ‘influence’ in this process. In that regard, participation in decision-making aspects of content production and organizational structure of community-based media offers the greatest potential to contribute to the democratization of local mediaspheres.

c. Participation for ‘whose benefits’?

Writing on the “uses and abuses” of the participatory rhetoric in development, White (1996) persuasively argues that although insightful, models solely focused on modalities of participation still leave unanswered the question of *who benefits* from participatory projects. This perspective is shared by authors who call for the re-politicization of participatory development by tracing the impacts of participation on local governance structures. As Williams (2004) argues, in order to materialize the democratic promise of participatory governance, community development projects need to expand people’s political agency and institutionalized opportunities to influence to local decision-making. This observation is critical for discussions on media democracy.

Focusing on the incentives people find to participate in development initiatives, White (1996) proposes to analyze “stakeholders’ interests” in these projects. She sees the process of participation as a form of stratified “community labor” where some get to define the nature of “community needs” and “community problems,” while others legitimate decisions, identify or implement solutions, and evaluate performance. White stresses that the perspective of donors, project managers, and decision-makers (top-down) is fundamentally different from other participants’ (bottom-up) (Table 3).

Table 3. Interests in community participation

Form	Top-down	Bottom-up	Function
Nominal	Legitimation	Inclusion	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency	Cost	Means
Representative	Sustainability	Leverage	Voice
Transformative	Empowerment	Empowerment	Means/End

Source: White (1996)

For instance, leaders may talk more readily about their vision, goals, and aspirations in relation to the intervention whereas underrepresented groups, who typically enjoy less socio-political recognition, may not easily voice their concerns, fearing rejection, further marginalization, and even reprisal. From their perspective, *nominal participation* by simply being informed of the project could be preferable to total exclusion. From the managers’ perspective, inviting participation of ‘underrepresented’ groups legitimizes their project. *Instrumental participation* typically facilitates citizen involvement in project implementation in order to reduce operational “costs” and generate “efficiencies.” For instance, managers invite community members to volunteer and perform certain tasks as local “in-kind donations” or “counterpart funds” of public-private partnerships. *Representative participation* is different in that it offers various opportunities for people to “voice” their concerns and leverage the benefits of their participation. The identification of social problems as “community needs” is a critical aspect of representative dynamics. In this process, “consultation” should not be confused with “empowered participation” in decision-making whereby people are given the option

to identify their needs, and select solutions to their problems. *Transformative participation* goes a step further by giving participants control over the “means and ends” for co-decision and co-ownership of community development projects.

d. Lessons for media and telecommunication policy

There are important media and telecommunication policy implications in the insights generated by this review of the participatory community development literature.

- First, improved conditions for *media access* (i.e. availability of services, openness, transparency, affordability, diffusion of information) should not be confused with *media participation*, which entails different degrees of interaction and co-decision in local media markets and institutions. As Carpentier (2011) aptly argues, information-sharing and consultation practices are associated to minimalist forms of participation, while partnerships, co-decision and co-ownership are expression of maximalist forms of engagement in the local information ecosystem.
- The vision of media participation as the representation of “minority” views and groups in media projects should be replaced by one of integration of underrepresented populations in different spheres of information governance. Promoting such integration ‘in’ and ‘through’ the media should emphasize both parity and plurality of stakeholders within communities.
- In locating crucial spaces for media participation, we should distinguish between participation in (1) content production, (2) media governance structures, and (3) the social mediation process. All three offer important affordances for media democracy; however, citizen participation in local media governance structures and institutions is critical for the democratization of local media markets.
- Participation in media governance of media projects demands transparency and clearly structured decision-making so citizens can understand how to engage in this process.
- Public participation in the planning phase of media and telecommunication projects is particularly important to optimize their positive externalities.
- Enhancing participatory governance demands capacity building efforts to expand people’s agency and ability to engage in their information ecosystem. For instance, media literacy and training programs fosters conditions for active citizen engagement in their local media-sphere.
- Finally, plurality of media governance structures (i.e. commercial outlets, public media, and community-based projects) provides a more robust institutional environment for media democracy.

Many of these ideas have figured prominently in policy debates of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and throughout its stocktaking process. However, the participatory rhetoric of the WSIS has not directly addressed power imbalances among global actors, instead limiting policy recommendations to the adoption of freedom of expression and information-sharing as standard practices in international regulatory forums. (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2005; Chakravartty, 2006). Bringing these debates back to the U.S. context, the following section discusses how the insights of the

community development literature help us to evaluate citizen participation in local information institutions.

IV. Mapping modalities of participation in local information ecosystems

Identifying publics, organizational spaces, and benefits behind media participatory practices is critical for any assessment of their democratic and community development potential. Media convergence complicates this task because digitization and deregulation have decentered production processes, and institutional functions previously thought as the exclusive responsibility of particular media organizations and professionals –most prominently the production and curation of news and public information– that could best serve the public interest. However, as Murdock (2005) persuasively argues, the key question for media researchers, practitioners and policy-makers is how to rebuild the ‘public domain’ in a digital media system increasingly controlled by commercial intermediaries. This section proposes to refocus these discussions by paying attention to different modalities of citizen participation in critical “public service” functions of local information markets.

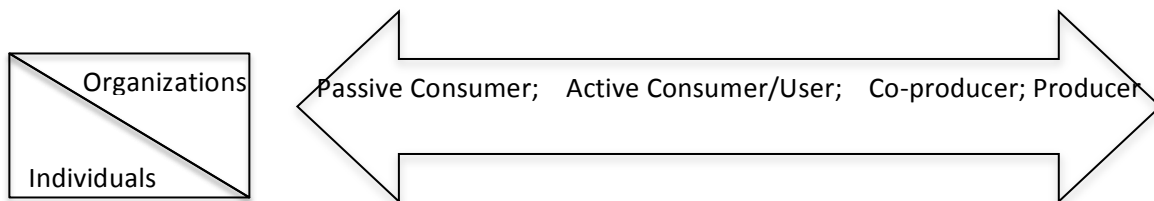
Documenting the digital transformation of public broadcasting organizations in the U.S., Jessica Clark and Pat Aufderheide (2009) first called attention on how digital media could bolster public service media functions by networking diverse publics and local institutions (i.e. community and citizen media, libraries, local government etc.) that generate relevant community and public information. Drawing on this work, Goodman and Chen (2010) have proposed to rethink public media organizations and regulation following a networked, “layered approach” that focuses on institutional connections around four critical functions of public service media. They include, 1) access to information distribution infrastructure; 2) creation of non-commercial content and applications; 3) curation or selection of content and applications with high social value; and 4) connection of diverse publics to support public discussion of important issues for community life (128). This approach offers several advantages. First, it allows us to think on interventions and regulation that can be applied across different digital information organizations. Second, building upon principles of network architecture, such as neutrality and openness, this model sponsors non-discriminatory access and use of information services. And third, as an organizing principle, the network approach is well suited for public media’s mission of engaging different publics at the local, regional, and national levels. Arguably, commercial media can serve similar functions; however, as Goodman and Chen argue, public and community media are mission-driven institutions created to engage “diverse and underserved publics at both local and national levels” (2010:125).

Still, while this layered approach helps us to locate critical areas for media participation, the model may not capture the complexities of social structures, and power dynamics of localities. In order to evaluate media projects’ impacts on diversity and localism, we should interrogate the impacts of different modalities of community participation on these critical functions. For instance, we should ask how different digital information projects create and enhance “capacities” of local residents (Williams 2004) to access, curate, produce, and exchange critical information in areas for community life, including emergencies and risk information, health and welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, quality of the environment and recreation, civic and political

information relevant for local governance (Friedland et al. 2012). One should also distinguish between “minimalist” or passive forms of participation —such as consuming information— and “maximalist” or transformative forms of participation based on consultation, co-production, co-decision, co-management or media projects (Carpentier, 2011). These analyses must consider not only how individuals interact with the media but also how local publics and organizations “influence” decision-making in their communities and who benefits. Table 4 synthesizes these ideas in a model of community participation in local information institutions.

Table 4. Synthetic Model of Community Participation in Local Information Institutions

Public service functions of local information institutions	Modalities of Citizen Participation			
	Nominal	Instrumental	Representative	Transformative
Access to Infrastructure				
Creation of Content				
Curation				
Connection				



(Adapted from Goodman & Chen, 2010; White, 1996; Williams 2004)

It is important to point out that the matrix offered here should not be construed as an attempt to build a comprehensive ‘typology’ of media participatory practices. Rather, this exercise seeks to identify different standpoints from which we can debate the democratic and community development potential of different modalities of media participation. Each space in the matrix represents different degrees of control and autonomy local actors (individuals or organizations) may enjoy in digital information projects. Building on White’s work (1996), the model considers four basic modalities of participation displayed by individuals or local organizations performing different roles as consumers, users, or producers of information and communication services. The matrix suggests that one may participate in decision-making processes of digital information projects by:

- consuming information and services produced by the project (*nominal participation*);
- creating an active relationship with communication and information providers through memberships or subscriptions packages (*instrumental participation*);

- voicing concerns and providing feedback through consultation and evaluation mechanism (such as ratings, reviews, surveys, polls, referenda) to improve the design, performance and benefits offered by the project (*representative participation*); or
- directly participating in co-ownership or co-management of local media and communication projects, and being able to influence the allocation of benefits (*empowered or transformative participation*).

Different forms of media participation may be realized in market or non-market spaces, or at the intersections of the two. Most people may engage in nominal or instrumental forms of media participation as consumers or subscribers of information and communication services; however, they may evolve towards representative and transformative forms of participation by organizing local consumer groups, collectively bargaining for lower prices, advocating for consumer and information rights, participating in open meetings or community advisory boards of media organizations, or even forming cooperative projects for the direct delivery of communication and information services, such as community wireless groups, cable access centers and low power radio stations.

This model also accommodates organizational evolution in the shifting field of public service media. Public and community-based media organizations now share their public functions with other local institutions such as libraries and schools. Defining the larger set of organizations that today encompass the changing field of public information services is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the following section provides examples of how this model helps us to interrogate how local publics engage in various aspects of their operations.

a. Participatory practices and the infrastructure layer

In the U.S. and abroad, universal service policies have historically support citizen access to telecommunication infrastructure. However, in the era of high-speed Internet services, access to and participation in this critical infrastructure has turned out to be a complex problem. According to federal statistics, 32% of American households lack access to broadband services (NTIA, 2011). Studies reveal that promoting access and use of these services also demand attention to issues of pricing and speed of the connection, network capacities and to problems of awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to use effectively these services (Dailey et al. 2010; Horrigan, 2010). Policy responses to these challenges are diverse but still heavily focused on availability of commercial services, and upgrade of network infrastructure.

For instance, the recent plan to revamp universal service policy through the Connect America Fund creates direct industry subsidies for the build out of high-speed networks in rural and high-cost areas. This adds to existing e-rates subsidies provided to local schools and libraries to pay discount rates for broadband connectivity. The FCC is also running pilot projects to extend direct subsidies for broadband service to low income households through its Lifeline program. Federal initiatives like the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program, and Telecommunication Loans and Grants programs for Rural Development have also directed most of their investment to building middle mile and last mile broadband networks in underserved and unserved areas. Investment in

public computing centers and adoption programs that involve more active engagement of community anchor institutions and local residents has been more modest. Although some states have banned municipal involvement in broadband infrastructure, others continue promoting public-private partnerships to create municipal and community broadband projects that can meet local needs of these services. However, evaluations of federal and state-funded broadband projects in rural communities have consistently found problems stemming from unclear or competing definitions of “community needs” (La Rose et al 2007; Strover et al., 2004). Lack of collaboration among local anchor institutions and local publics is one of the main factors slowing down sustainable broadband adoption. Such problems are typically associated with top-down interventions that mostly promote nominal participation of local stakeholders (Strover, 2009). Despite increasing evidence about the need for participatory development approaches to broadband policy interventions, regulators in the U.S. have largely ignored these discussions. How can we assess the participatory development potential of these different policy interventions in the infrastructure layer? Table 5 locates some of them in the proposed matrix of community participation.

Table 5. Modalities of Community Participation in the Infrastructure Layer

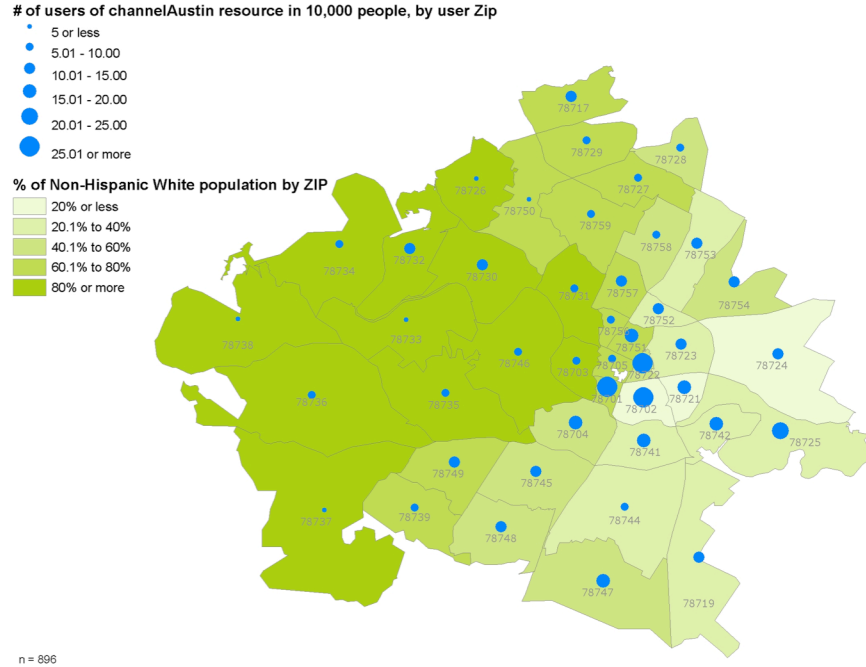
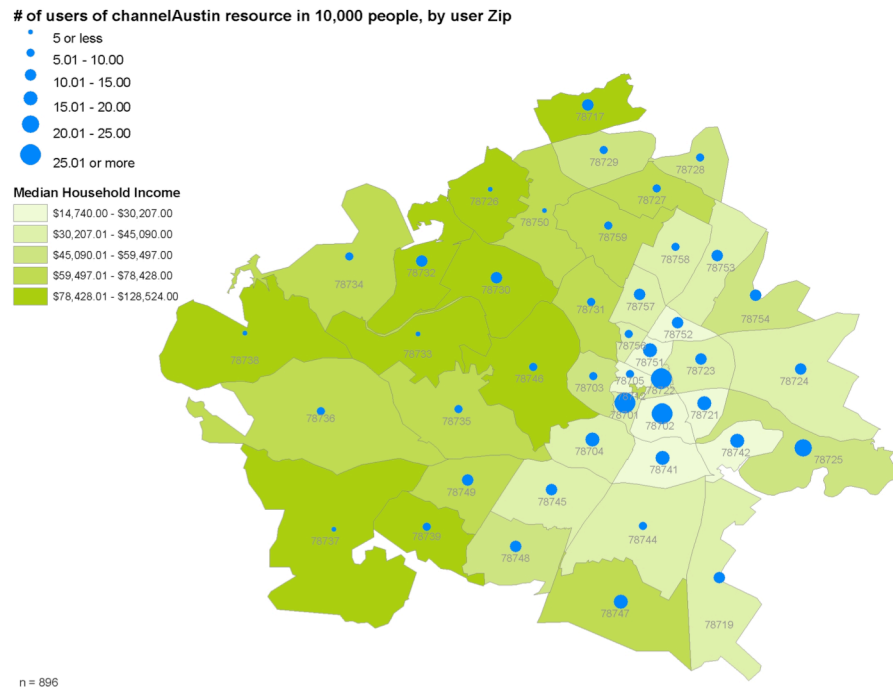
Infrastructure Layer	Modalities of Participation			
	Nominal	Instrumental	Representative	Transformative
Participation of local organizations	Being a institutional or commercial customer in a service area	Receiving E-rate subsidies; Community anchor institution receiving BTOP infrastructure grant	Being part of a business demand aggregation initiative	Municipal/ community broadband project; Community anchor institution adopt and effectively use BB apps
Participation of local residents	Being a residential/ individual customer in a service area	Receiving Lifeline / Link-up subsidies; Benefiting from promotional sales for target customers	Being part of a household demand aggregation initiative	Being part of a consumer cooperative initiative; Capable user of broadband-enabled apps

As currently defined, universal service mandates only promote “nominal” or “instrumental” participation in the infrastructure layer by ensuring the inclusion of communities and residents in ISPs’ service areas. E-rate subsidies for broadband connectivity of local institutions such as schools and libraries facilitate the participation of these local institutions as consumers of broadband services (Fuentes-Bautista, forthcoming). In contrast, municipal and community broadband projects most of the

times involved representative or empowered forms of participation of local actors such as municipalities, local providers, consumer and citizen groups, who partner up and co-own telecommunication infrastructure. For instance,

Likewise, municipal control on the local cable systems enables representative or empowered forms of citizen participation in the infrastructure layer by providing video equipment and media training to produce digital content. Community media projects can play a critical role as community gateways to broadband services for underrepresented groups. An evaluation of membership and citizen uses of community broadcasting services in Austin, TX found that more than 1,200 users engage in the center tend to be residents of ethnically diverse and economically challenge areas of the city (Graph 1). In sum, community broadband and media projects can enhance participation in the infrastructure layer by partnering with anchor, community-based and minority-serving institutions to aggregate demand, offer communication services and digital media training.

Graph 1.- Citizen membership in the Austin's Digital Access Center



Source: Fuentes-Bautista, forthcoming

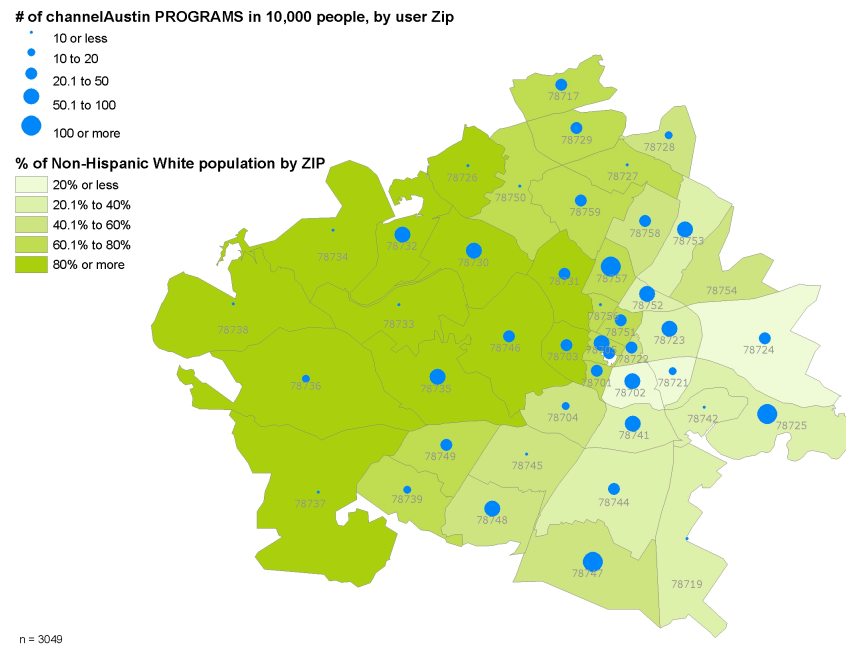
b. Participatory practices at the creation layer

The production of locally relevant content not supported by the market, and the appropriation of new media applications for community uses, are important dimensions for policies that support and expand content diversity in terms of issues, sources, and local voices represented in different electronic spaces. The use of social media tools by commercial organizations to create hyperlocal websites and niche markets of news does not necessarily fulfill this public service media function. Commercial hyperlocal websites are a new source of profits for media corporations that employ networking technologies to extract local knowledge and use local audiences to create online databases, in the hope that this information would attract local consumers that are sold to advertisers. In this process, locally-based knowledge and the work of local social networks are appropriated and monetized by non-local actors and corporations through a process that does not necessarily expand existing capacities to generate diverse, local content. Moreover, commercial hyperlocal, city-specific websites serving top U.S. markets do not publish appreciable amounts of original local news content (Lynn et al., 2007). In terms of the ability to speak and interact through digital environments, surveys show that a surprisingly small percentage of the U.S. population—less than 15% of active online users—actually engages in the production of their own websites, blogs, or videos.⁴ Findings of an assessment of creative online activities of young adults nationwide suggest that neither creation nor sharing is randomly distributed among diverse youth, potentially leading to an online “participatory divide” (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Arguably, boosting capacities of diverse local publics and institutions to generate digital content. However, it is important to think not only about the system of incentives audiences find in these dynamics but also in the distribution of benefits and positive externalities generated by these exchanges.

For instance, in my work with publics of community access centers moving to digital operations, I have identified some key differences between the commercial hyperlocal websites, and community-produced hyperlocal projects. First, community-based hyperlocal projects tend to engage producers and residents of ethnically diverse areas of the cities and towns they serve (Graph 2), and their productions are distributed through multiple online and offline “windows,” including local cable channels, community radio programs and podcasts, blogs and individual online projects, local festivals and community screenings, non-profit organizations, circles of local artists (musicians, other video-producers), and religious communities and churches. Second, these dynamics involve the action of diverse local creative cultures catering to variety of “glocal” publics (some are small and geographically-based audiences while others could be national or transnational communities). Finally, community productions commonly need and use online and offline cooperation between citizen producers and viewers, creating new spaces for local interaction. Peer-learning and training through flexible formats and informal exchanges of information are manifestation of such interactions.

⁴ See “Trend Data” (Online Pursuits of American Adults) of Pew Internet & American Life Project, available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-%28Adults%29/Online-Activities-Daily.aspx>

Graph 2.- Citizen productions in Austin's digital access center (2009)



Source: Fuentes-Bautista, forthcoming

c. Participatory practices at the curation layer

Digitization has expanded public libraries' traditional role as repositories and curators of knowledge to become public Internet access points and "community information systems" that facilitate access to and use of a wide range of critical community information, from e-government to e-health, education, and employment (Bertot, Jaeger & McClure, 2011; Friedland et al, 2012). Libraries also facilitate production and curation of digital community content by creating online archives of local information, community calendars, and offering digital literacy training for residents. Local publics can engage in these activities performing different roles as patrons, volunteers, sponsors, members of community advisory groups, managers etc. Lankes et al (2007) propose the concept of "participatory librarianship" to refer to the combined use of social media technologies, co-design, and user-centric methods to support 'community conversations' between librarians and networks of local patrons that co-create digital repositories of community information.

Some have suggested that in an online social media environment, user-generated content can meet all audiences' needs for local content. However, this potential may not be realized because local online audiences may also lack the skills and information about content options available online at a given time (Hargittai, 2007). Changes in distribution of digital content and information bring new challenges for *curation* of relevant public service content. Supporting this function is also critical to overcome problems of information saturation characteristic of online media spaces, harnessing the potential of

online distribution to support consumption of diverse content. The creation of networked, local content aggregators, diversity of local media collections, and accessible modes of access to these archives are important components of a strategy that support diversity and localism in the digital transition. A number of innovative community broadcasting stations that embraced the challenge of the digital transition have come together to promote the use of open source tools and collaborative practices (i.e. Open Media Project, MIRO Community, Community Media Collection) for online aggregation and archiving of local video content.⁵ The vision behind this movement is to increase citizen participation in community media projects through a co-administered curation process.⁶ The involvement of local organizations and citizen in the creation of locally curated media collections can also help to circumvent the inability of linear programming schedules to account for increasingly fragmented flows of media content.

d. Participatory practices at the connection layer

In a media space increasingly dominated by social networking dynamics, there is a growing need for *connecting* individuals, local anchor and minority-serving institutions. Media outreach programs to increase both involvement of local publics in the media, and interactions among them, are critical to expand the positive externalities of networking communication dynamics (i.e., social capital and civic engagement). Outreach activities should not be limited to “audience feedback” (e.g., user-generated ratings, letters to the editor) but also include consultation mechanisms (comments and community meetings from audience members), and mechanisms for cooperation, partnerships, and co-ownership in digital information projects. Citizen journalism projects are particularly appropriate to connect local audiences, institutions, and decision-makers through transformative participatory practices, enabling dialogue and debate about issues that matter to communities. A content analysis of articles published online by commercial newspapers and citizen journalism projects found that online citizen journalism articles were more likely to feature a greater diversity of topics, information from outside sources, suggesting that citizen projects bring a stronger support to media diversity than that provided by the marketplace (Carpenter, 2010).

Engaging underserved populations and minority groups in citizen-media projects expand local capacities to create and effectively use media. But does this involvement make a difference in underrepresented groups’ ability to connect and mobilize around issues? Important lessons can be drawn from the role of Latino/a community media organizations in mobilizing diverse publics for immigrant rights in California, New York and Illinois. Legislative debates that criminalized undocumented immigrants in states like California and Arizona have galvanized pro- and anti-immigrant groups nationwide. As explained by Castañeda-Paredes (2011), while nationally syndicated Latino press in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City tried to avoid the politics of immigration

⁵ Rhinesmith, C. (2010 April 26) “*How PEG Access TV Serves Underserved Communities.*” Available at <http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/node/31052>

⁶ Sinclair, C. et al. (2011) “*Opensourcing community media.*” Presentation at the National Conference of Media Reform. <http://conference.freepress.net/session/458/open-sourcing-community-media>

reform through “objective” and limited news coverage of the events, Latino/a community media outlets share information about immigrant rights, community resources, and raided worker sites. Networking various community-based media outlets, unions, and other citizen groups, advocates and members of migrant communities garnered broad support for immigrant rights in California.

V. Conclusions

I have provided an overview of how the development and community planning literature conceptualizes different modalities of participatory practices, discussing their import for the redefinition of diversity and localism policies for the digital transition. Key points that emerge from literature include the distinction between passive or nominal forms of media participatory practices through access and information consumption, and those that lead to effective inclusion in local digital environments through generative and transformative practices of collaboration, co-production and co-decision. Building on a participatory development approach to media diversity and localism the paper presents a matrix of modalities of community participation in four key functions of digital information organizations: access communication infrastructure; creation and curation of publicly relevant content; and networking of diverse publics. This approach offers several advantages for the assessment of digital information projects. First, this perspective challenges functionalist notions of digital media as naturally “inclusive” spaces, allowing us to interrogate how power is constituted through networked exchanges and within communities of place. Second, interrogating the institutional dimension of media participation captures the fluidity of user/producer dynamics, and the multiple roles that citizens, industry, groups and organizations can play in the social mediation process through electronic networks. Finally, conceptualizing media diversity and localism as participatory practices helps us to recognize that they are in fact means for the attainment of larger goals, namely the inclusion of residents and local organizations in local deliberation and governance. This perspective suggests that in today’s society, the “participation gap” is indeed is a multi-layered concept that may not be solved by access policies. As Gumucio-Dagrón (2008) reminds us, the right to information refers to access, while the right to communication refers to participation in the appropriation of production, content and meaning of media. As recommended by the Knight Commission on Information Needs of Community in a Democracy (2009), policy interventions should “enhance the information capacity of individuals,” and support the expansion of socialized forms of communication at the local level. These capabilities are manifested not only through engaged individuals and vibrant civic cultures but also in the expansion of likelihoods for the overall community. To conclude, even as the spread of social media have popularized notions of “community” as self-organized, virtual groups that operate beyond geographic boundaries, the potential impact of online media still depends on the actual abilities of localities to access, receive, produce, exchange, and discuss messages circulated online. One of the challenges before us is how to use networking technologies to function as a community in both electronic and geographical spaces. This paper has suggested areas where regulators and practitioners may foster inclusion through increased forms of representative and empowered participation in various public service media functions.

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